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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2018
TAGS: KIRF PREL PROP PHUM PGOV KE ER
SUBJECT: ERITREAN AMBASSADOR IN KENYA COMPLICIT IN
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Former Eritrean Orthodox Bishop Hadgu Gebrehimanot (protect) gave visiting Embassy Asmara PolOff a detailed description of his harassment and assault by Eritrean embassy officials in Nairobi, including reported threats from Eritrean Ambassador Saleh Umar. According to Bishop Hagdu, the Eritrean embassy demanded control of the church's financial resources and the bishop's refusal led to his assault by embassy officials. Bishop Hadgu is currently hiding in a safe location in Nairobi. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Bishop Hadgu arrived in Nairobi in October 2006 to take charge of the Eritrean Orthodox Church of Kenya and its nearly 1,500 congregates. Hadgu is the fourth bishop in five years to be appointed to Nairobi by the now-deposed patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios. The GSE sacked the previous three bishops and possibly imprisoned them upon their return to Asmara. Soon after his arrival, Bishop Hadgu began investigating a substantial accounting discrepancy in the church's finances. When the bishop approached the Eritrean embassy about the shortfall, the ambassador warned him to not investigate the matter further. The ambassador also allegedly demanded a large sum of hard currency from the church.

¶3. (C) On September 13, 2008, the bishop, who lived on the church compound, saw the ambassador and several accomplices place a padlock on the church. The accomplices then broke into tWeWbishop's resiWeWce and assaulted him and the housekeeper, threatening him with knives, and stealing 180,000 Kenyan shillings (\$2,571). Two of the bishop's aides witnessed the crime and called Kenyan police. The police took Bishop Hadgu a police station, where he filed his report, and then to a Catholic-run facility for refugees from the region, where he is believed to be safe. The bishop claimed the police did not arrest the assailants because Ambassador Saleh had bribed them in advance. The bishop said he put this statement in his police report as well.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Bishop Hadgu's story is not uncommon. Eritrean embassies are largely self-financing and serve as collection points for coerced donations from the diaspora. Post believes the church's missing finances ended up in the hands of the Eritrean embassy, as this is in keeping with GSE's practice in Eritrea of controlling all Orthodox Church collection boxes. The bishop's story provides the first evidence of an Eritrean government official being directly

involved not only in the forced collection of such funds, but also in the harassment and physical abuse that accompany refusal to comply. End Comment.

¶5. (SBU) Note: Asmara PolOff Ajani Husbands developed this report during a professional development TDY to Nairobi. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Nairobi.
MCMULLEN